Episode 27:

Taking the PARTY

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

out of POLITICS

A Summary of Challenges

Hello and Welcome to *Taking the Party out of Politics*!

This is a podcast about understanding how politics is supposed to work, …
… why it isn't working as well as it could be working, …
… and what we might be able to do about it.
Because:
by understanding a little bit more clearly *how* things are supposed to work,
and *why* they are a bit messed up,
we *might* be able to get things to work a *bit better*. Perhaps even a *lot better*.

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This is a little journey we are taking together, about the systems and functioning of Politics: systems which we should all understand, because those systems affect all of our lives, all of the time.
And this podcast is about how we might be able to make those systems work a bit better.

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In Season 1, we took a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of us – the voters.
In Season 2, we took a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of someone trying to get elected, and then trying to do a good job.
This is Season 3. In Season 3, we are going to be looking at what we might be able to do, to make things work a bit better. We will be using our understanding of what bits of our political systems aren't working, and why they aren't working, to explore ways in which we might be able to change things around a bit to make it all work a bit better. Importantly, whilst we will be sharing our ideas, we will also be sharing some of the best of YOUR ideas, about how to make things work a bit better.

Welcome to episode 27 of Taking the Party out of Politics, but more importantly:
Welcome to the first episode of Season 3.

If you are just joining us today, then you are in luck, because today we are going to have a quick overview of all the big ideas which we have covered over the last 26 or so episodes. Why politics isn't working for us, the voters, and why it isn't really even working for the politicians who are trying to do their bests on our behalf, struggling to work within the political systems. Why there are some problems with the very nature of what we call *representative democracy* and electoral systems, but also why there are some problems which political parties bring on top of those structural problems.

If you think that you need more details on any of the big ideas which – to be fair – we are only really going to touch on today, then please go back and have a listen to the relevant previous episodes.

Today, we are going to group our review around three main areas: Voters and Voting, Representative Democracy, and Political Parties.

1. **Part 1: Voters and Voting.**
Let's start with us. The voters.
At least some of the time, we aren't doing our part as fully as we could or should be doing.

There is a rather wonderfully sounding theory called 'Rational Ignorance'[1]. The idea of Rational Ignorance is that it is '...individually irrational to be well-informed…'.

Well, that could probably be better phrased.
Or, at least, phrased in a way which is easier to get your head around quickly.
It is individually irrational to want to be well-informed about everything.
In a busy world, and in a limited lifetime, we have to make choices.
We can't do everything. And we can't know everything.
They say that "a copy of the daily New York Times contains more information than the average 17th-century Englishman encountered in a lifetime"[2]. Now that's probably not strictly true. It might not even be true if we only think about the amount of written information in the New York Times compared to the amount of written information which the average person in the 17th Century might read. But there's something about that claim which feels as though it is in the right direction. There just is SO MUCH information around.
Faced with a choice of understanding the Theory of General Relativity, the possibility of armed insurrection in Central Africa, or how to fix the leak in your own roof, different perspectives make different things important to different people. Or, put another way, the importance of different subjects to individuals depends on how personal each subject is to them.

That sort of makes sense, doesn't it? I can do something about my leaky roof, so it makes sense that I should be reasonably well informed about it. The possibility of armed insurrection in Central Africa might seem to be important, but it might also seem to be something over which I would have no influence at all. At least not directly. Not immediately. And would understanding the Theory of General Relativity help me in anything other than a conversation with my much cleverer, younger brother?

Well, the system of representative democracy is sort of premised on that sort of thinking. We elect some people to represent our interests, because it doesn't make sense for us all to spend the time required to understand all of the things which we ask our politicians to (try to) understand on our behalf.

But that doesn't give us the right to just give up. We elect representatives, but we also have to do better than to just pass the buck IN ITS ENTIRETY to those elected representatives.

1Anthony Downs: An Economic Theory of Democracy (1957)

2https://archive.nytimes.com/artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/23/too-much-information-about-information/

If we stop thinking completely, and pass the buck entirely to our elected representatives, then how are we to know if they are doing a good job? How are we to hold them to account?

We don't want to be doing their work for them. The idiom is that no one wants to have a dog and have to bark as well. But we do want to understand why our dog is barking. We don't want a dog which just barks at everything and at nothing. A dog like that would not just annoy us and annoy the neighbours. A dog like that would be pretty useless, because we would never know when it was something important. We need to work with the dog. We need to ensure that it understands what noises are normal, and what noises are worrisome. We want a dog which will draw our attention to unusual things, just in case it is important.   And to have a really useful dog, we need to work with the dog, so that it understands what is really important to us.

Our elected representatives may work like dogs at times. It is hard work, and long hours. But, truth be told, they are not dogs. Nonetheless, the analogy does more or less follow through. We can't just cast our vote once every 5 years, and then sit back and not think about things ever again. We need to be a little bit informed, and we need to ensure that our MPs know what we care about, and that we care about what they are doing on our behalf.

But we have a failure to engage, on the part of the electorate

> **What do we do about the failure to engage?**
> Recent election results serve to highlight some of the many ways in which our current system of representative democracy and party politics is failing. We have ended up being governed by a political party with a majority of MPs, but sometimes with only 36% of the national vote, probably elected as much because they managed to appear slightly less useless than the alternatives (for example, the general election of December 2019). Hardly a mandate for the manifesto of that political party, and yet that is how it is being taken.
> So, what do we do about this Failure to Engage (on the part of the voters)?
> Representative democracy in the UK is currently failing to engage, failing to enthuse, failing to motivate, failing to satisfy.
> There are various reasons for this. Failures of individual politicians are part of it. Failures of political parties are also a large part of it. But perhaps the biggest failure is the failure of the system to match the needs of a mature democratic society, and of a mature economy.
>
> Let's take those in order.
>
> First: Failures of individual politicians. There are many instances in which venal or stupid behaviour by individual politicians has undermined public confidence in politicians in general. Politicians are probably no worse in this instance than any other part of our society, but it seems worse when our trust in them is not respected.
> In fact, the modern political party system seems to require that politicians have very little else in their lives other than politics – many of them have no other career or experience (which in itself probably means that they are actually not very good representatives of the general population, with no experience and no way of relating to most people). The gamble of a 5-yearly electoral cycle in which a national swing or scandal can unseat an otherwise exemplary individual (Douglas Alexander?), probably doesn't help.
> We can add to this the blunders of our governments. With tenure of any political post being far less than the results of any major policy initiative, our politicians (and perhaps

also our civil servants) are not judged on the results of their work, but on sound bites whilst the paint is still fresh. Our politicians have little or no experience of collaborative working, building consensus, consulting to ensure that every angle has been considered, and our electoral system gives great executive power which does not require them to do so. So … they don't.

What are politicians actually good for? Well, quite a few things, as it turns out. Some are actually excellent constituency MPs, representing the needs of their area, and representing constituents who need support over particular issues. Some are excellent on scrutiny committee, publicly holding the civil service, the government, business and just about anyone and anything to account. Both of these functions are incredibly important and are very valuable to the operation of government, ensuring appropriate checks and balances are in place.

Electing MPs to perform these functions is entirely appropriate. And the sort of person who might be elected to such a role, for 5, or perhaps 10, years, would not have had to commit their entire life to a political party, but could actually simply be taking a sensible leave of absence from successful engagement with the rest of society, the world of work, and the world which the rest of the population inhabits.

Manifestos
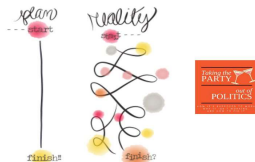
Promises?
Wish lists?
Sleight of hand?

Second: Failures of political parties.

As representative party politics is currently played out, we are only able to select either this manifest or that one. Even if everything we want is in one manifesto or another, it is unlikely that everything is in one manifesto alone. We probably want a bit of this one, and a bit of that one. And, in fact, we probably want a bit of something else which is not actually in any of the manifestos on offer. But we are given an all or nothing choice.

Perhaps this is not a failure of political parties *per se*, but is a failure at the level of the political party. Another way of looking at this would be to say that political parties should not really be trying to get elected. They should be lobbying for particular policies to be included in the national manifesto, and then the best administrators should actually put those policies into practice.

One item on a manifesto…

…does not a mandate make

Third: Failures of the political system of a representative democracy.

In short, the system as it is currently set out, is trying to achieve too much with the one tool which we have available to us: one vote, once every five years.
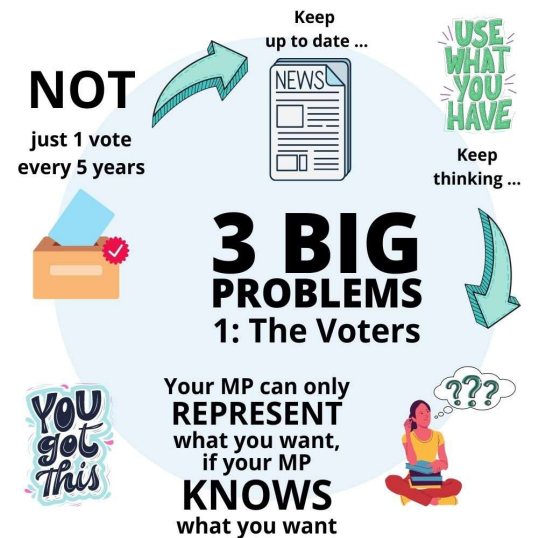
It is a nonsense that we are expected to select, with one vote, three different things.

1.   Our local representative.
2.   A member of a national party which, if victorious, will form the government.
3.   The manifesto which best represents what we want our government to enact.

If we are successfully to do the first, then our local choice should really be one of selecting a worthy individual, not one influenced by national party executives, campaign managers and PR gurus.

If we are successfully to do the second, then we should really be selecting members of an electoral college who will actually elect the best administrators to put into practice what is agreed by the population as a whole to really represent our beliefs and interests – to make us into the sort of country we would like to be, and into the sort of country we would like to be seen to be.

If we are successfully to do the third, then, as set out above, we should really be selecting the cocktail of policy measures which really represent our views.

NOT just 1 vote every 5 years

Keep up to date ...

NEWS

USE WHAT YOU HAVE

Keep thinking ...

3 BIG PROBLEMS
1: The Voters

YOU got This

Your MP can only **REPRESENT** what you want, if your MP **KNOWS** what you want

???

2. **Part 2: Next, let's think about the system we are working with. Representative Democracy.**

What could be better than democracy?

Well, perhaps many things. Or nothing.

But there might well be a range of possible improvements to the *representative* democracy we have in the west.

How is it really reflecting the will of the people to be making a binary choice between two (or more) packages of manifesto policy measures, when what we might actually want might be a bit of both? Or something else entirely.

It is certainly not providing the popular mandate which elected politicians like to claim for any particular item within the winning manifesto. And they certainly don't have the right - elected with a minority of the overall vote, even if that translates to a majority of parliamentary seats in a skewed first-past-the-post system - to act without full and inclusive consultation.

(e.g., 36% of the electorate voted for David Cameron in 2015, which led him to follow through on one small part of his manifesto, to hold a referendum on membership of the EU, which led to slightly over half of the 70% of the electorate which bothered to vote, voting for Brexit – that's more of a stumbling than a plan)

We need elected administrators who will build consensus, not act unilaterally.

We certainly shouldn't be surrendering the power of the people (the *kratos* of the *demos*). But perhaps we should be choosing good administrators when we vote, and then orientating the general tone and direction of national policy – choosing what we want them to do – in a different way.

What should that way be?

Well, there are many think tanks, and we could certainly learn from them. Particularly if their output was communicated clearly and succinctly. But they are not sufficient in their own right. We also need involvement, engagement without the emotional hyperbole of party politics or of a pseudo class warfare.

We need to understand the real statistics, the real implications of decisions, and not just make assumptions, or take decisions based upon half understood posturing.

We need to think about what sort of (good) country we want to be.

And then we need to elect good administrators and leaders to make it so.

This really is the time of the third way. Is is not about us and them.

We truly are all in this together.

A Summary of Problems

2.a The System

Our Elected Representatives don't really *represent* us at all

The problem is that *representative democracy* does not *represent*

While we are on the subject, what are some of the other large-scale failings of our system of representative democracy?

Well, one is the Media. It is sort of baked into the system of representative democracy that the media should be calling attention to what our elected representatives are doing, helping us to see the big picture, ensuring that things are transparent. But Media attention tends to be focused on sound bite, on grabbing our attention, and so ultimately focused on pandering to trivialities of popular opinion.

A Summary of Problems

2.b The Media ...

... has it's own agenda

Owen Jones: Mediaocracy
The British people are not being served by a media that exists to inform them, to educate them, to understand the realities of the country they live in and the world around them. Instead, much of the media is a political machine, lobbying for the often personal objectives of their owners. The media and political elites are frequently deeply intertwined, sharing as they do many of the same assumptions about how society should be run and organized. Journalists are often utterly subordinated to the whims of their editors, and increasingly drawn from backgrounds that are strikingly different from those of their readers.
The Establishment p 123

Another large scale failing of our system of representative democracy is that it has come to mean that we seem to be requiring Career politicians only: lack of life experience; lack of achievement (self-actualisation); tendency to corruption, internal competition and point scoring

A Summary of Problems

2.c Politicians ...

... don't have much other experience

Owen Jones: The Westminster Cartel
Britain's political life remains under a suffocating ideological grip. ... Those who are deemed to have gone even slightly 'off message', to have diverged even modestly from Establishment thinking, are stigmatized and smeared, portrayed as being outside the boundaries of legitimate political debate. The upholders of this consensus have personal stakes in its continuation. The political and the wealthy elites are not separate entities: there is a profound overlap between them
The Establishment p 84

Finally, a large scale failing of our system of representative democracy is that our voting system itself is archaic and divisive.

Voting system 'archaic and divisive'
The Electoral Reform Society has described the 2015 general election as being the "most disproportionate in British history".
If we didn't have the 'first past the post' system of voting – both at the constituency level and also at the national level – then we might well have had very different governments.
For example, in 2015, David Cameron was elected with a Conservative majority (having previously only been in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats). But, if the number of MPs were allocated more according to the national share of the vote which each party received, the results might have been very different.
UKIP could have won as many as 80 MPs and the Greens 20.
UKIP received 3.9 million votes and the Greens 1.2 million, and they ended up with one MP each.
Katie Ghose, chief executive of the Electoral Reform Society, described the current UK voting system, usually known as first-past-the-post, as "archaic" and "divisive".

She said: it "leaves millions disenfranchised and forces millions more to feel that they have to vote for a 'lesser evil.'"

"It's about time we had a fairer system for electing our MPs."

In a survey commissioned by the society and carried out by pollsters YouGov, over 40,000 people were asked how they would have voted in the general election had they been required to rank the parties in order of preference.

The report, entitled *The 2015 General Election: A Voting System in Crisis*, found that under a list-based system of proportional representation, similar to the kind used in European elections, the outcome would have been very different.

In this case Conservatives would have won 242 seats (-89), Labour 208 (-24), the SNP 30 (-26), but the Lib Dems 47 (+39), Plaid Cymru 5 (+2), UKIP 80 (+79) and the Greens 20 (+19).

However, the analysis also found that under an alternative vote system, where voters' preferences are reallocated until one candidate gets over 50%, the election result would have been similar the result which was actually seen in 2015, with the Conservatives winning 337 seats - an increase of six.

In this case Labour would have 227 (-5), the SNP 54 (-2), the Lib Dems 9 (+1), Plaid Cymru 3 (no change), UKIP 1 (no change) and the Greens 1 (no change).

And the research showed that under a single transferable vote (STV) system, similar to the kind currently used in Scottish local elections, the Conservatives would have won 276 seats (-55), Labour 236 (+4), the SNP 34 (-22), the Lib Dems 26 (+18), Plaid Cymru 3 (nc), UKIP 54 (+53) and the Greens 3 (+2).

"Our voting system is breaking up Britain," Ms Ghose added.

"First Past the Post is artificially dividing the UK, giving the SNP nearly all Scottish seats on half the vote, while excluding Labour from the south of England and over-representing them in Wales."

The report also found:

• 50% of votes in the election - 22 million - went to losing candidates

• 2.8 million voters were likely to have voted "tactically"

• The election saw an MP win on the lowest vote share in electoral history 24.5% in Belfast South

• 331 of 650 MPs were elected on under 50% of the vote, and 191 with less than 30% of the electorate

Since the election, politicians from UKIP, the Greens, Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru and the SNP have supported a petition calling for voting reform.[3]

A Summary of Problems
2.d The Electoral System

... is archaic and divisive

3The Electoral Reform Society used the D'Hondt method for converting votes to seats in a list-based PR system.

3. **Finally, today, let's think about the way in which our political systems are used (and abused) by our political parties.**

Most British people are not highly politicized. But our politics is.

To say that most British people are not highly politicized isn't to say that people don't have opinions. Nor is it to say that people can't have a good old row about politics. In fact, there is a standing rule at many 'formal' dinners that three subjects should not be discussed (in case the discussion ends up in an unseemly argument). Sex, religion, and politics. People have strong opinions about all three of these subjects, very often in a range of directions. Sometimes well-informed opinions. Sometimes just inherited assumptions (some people have never really questioned what their parents used to think, and just vote the same way). But opinions, all the same.

British politics, however, is highly politicized. Not merely in the sense that British politics is interested in the issues. In the sense that political parties are everywhere, with their needs and wants and demands and pressures. The total number of members of all political parties may well be less than the total number of members of the RSPB (or many other organisations), but the members of those parties are extraordinarily partisan. Their party can do no wrong (until it suddenly can, and then it can do no right); the opposition parties can do no right.
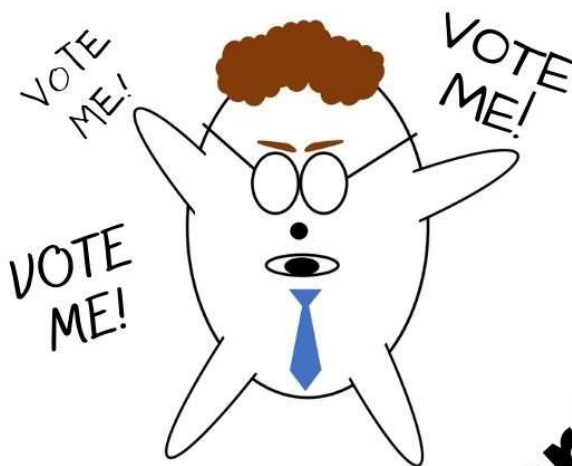
More accurately, then, British politics is highly *party politicized*.

Our Ministers are selected from a small pool of people who are largely career politicians, often with little experience of life and work outside politics. And a small number of people across the country actually 'select' those people to be our Ministers[4] – in so far as they are selected by just a small number of party members to stand in safe seats (see the Episode on Ministers and Safe Seats).

Ministers might wait their entire political careers for one 18-month (or shorter) stint as a Minister: their only real opportunity to actually 'do' something. It is completely understandable that they might then be in a rush to make the most of what might be their only, very limited opportunity. Understandable; but not actually very good for the rest of us.

Legislation in a rush is too often ill considered, often ineffective, and sometimes actually counterproductive, even if only assessed by the standards of its own objectives. Ministers are quite powerful, and can ignore advice, can ignore possible impacts of what they want to get done. They don't need to build consensus. They don't need to consult. And – far too often – we get bad legislation. And that bad legislation is rushed through an ineffective scrutiny process, which itself is shackled to the demands of party loyalty.

At the same time, the really important things are not addressed properly, or even at all. The *wicked issues* are left in the 'too difficult' or 'too risky' pile, and just become more difficult and more risky as time goes by.
The excellent book *Who Governs Britain?* (Anthony King) suggests that we could ask our politicians to use the system differently. The general shape of a possible solution could be described as a 'Nordic Style' (pp 297-301):

1. Encourage due deliberation (p 298)
2. Consider not only the abstract merits of proposed courses of action but also what would be involved, in practical terms, in giving effect to them (p 299)
3. Make policy slowly, and change it rarely (p 300)
4. Tackle the 'wicked issues' (pp 300-301)
5. Adopt a more consensual, less confrontational governing style (which) increases the chance that the general public will retain at least a degree of respect for the political class. (p301)

That sounds great. And many MPs might agree that it just sounds like good sense. David Cameron thought that it would be a good idea to have more consensual government, which didn't rush policy through – until he became Prime Minister, and realised how much simpler it was to use the system in the way it was already being used. And abused.

Good sense, possibly. But turkeys don't vote for Christmas, and we are not going to change a litter problem simply by putting up signs asking people not to drop litter. Habits are hard to change – ask any smoker. Or any lover of chocolate biscuits.

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4 <u>Who Governs Britain?</u> p170

Actually, that was uncalled for. MPs are not turkeys. Well. Most of them aren't. There are a few about whom it is probably wise to reserve judgement. But, most of them aren't'.

But MPs are not going to be able to change the system on their own, just because they think it is a good idea. And, certainly, their parties simply aren't going to stop trying to control and influence things.

Premier League football clubs are not going suddenly to win the league by only tackling the opposition politely, or always owning up to any mistakes or transgressions, and gracefully expecting the other clubs to do the same. Can you imagine a player walking over to the referee and saying that that penalty shouldn't be awarded, because he actually tripped over and there was no contact from the defender? Other clubs will simply take advantage of a few polite players and clubs.

Political Parties aren't going to stop trying to take control.
Why would they? It's what they have been honed to do, over decades[5].

If you are finally selected as a Minister, or even Prime Minister, you're not going to turn round and say that you are going to take everything slowly, build consensus around all new legislation, and ensure that full consultation takes place so that all the implications are fully understood. Well, you might say it. But when push comes to shove, and your position in the polls is under scrutiny, and another General Election is coming over the horizon … well?

Nope. All the best intentions are left at the door, and the situation forces your behaviour.

But, as we have seen, the way in which this party machinery operates is not just unbalancing our political processes. It is disabling them. And it is causing – or, at least, not helping to avoid – government blunders. Blunders which are hurting people. Blunders which are costing us all. Blunders which could have been avoided, if government policy had been properly scrutinised, and properly, constructively challenged.

(The activities of) Political Parties end up actually damaging the effectiveness of our political system. They are so good at what they do, so good at controlling the system, that the system isn't working as well as it should. Or as well as it could.

political parties prioritize their own needs.

5It wasn't always this way. In the 18th Century, for example, voting in Parliament was not controlled by party whips. Whigs generally supported the financial and commercial interests of London - and the expansion of the British Empire. Tories were traditionalists, loyal to the monarchy and to the Church. The boundary between the two was flexible, and there was often no clear ideological platform upon which all members could agree.
Of course, there were other problems with politics in the 18th Century – not least that politicians often didn't respect their constituents, didn't care what their constituents thought, and believed that they knew better than the voters who elected them. But that's a different story!

What would the system be like, if we adjusted the way in which it operates?
What would the system be like, if we managed to reduce the ways in which the influence of Political Parties was able to affect too much of what happens?

Well, the implication is that the system would work better.
The systems would catch more of the government blunders before those blunders ended up hurting people's lives, and before they ended up costing us all.
We would get better laws and regulations.
Our MPs would be doing a better job.
And, quite frankly, they'd probably enjoy that job more, too.

So, how do we do this?
How do we make the political systems work better?

Which really means: **How do we take the Party out of Politics?**

1. **What can we do about it?**

So, why doesn't our representative democracy work properly?
Let's take a breath for a moment, and look at where we have got to.
There are problems with the way things currently work with our
- Politicians
- Our political parties
- Our media
- The electoral system
- Parliament and Government
- The Separation of Powers

And, also, truth to be told, there are also problems with
- Us. The voters

What is the effect of our representative democracy not working properly?

We end up with

- Politicians (and sometimes civil servants) being reactive, not considered enough;
- A lack of consultation;
- A lack of consensus building;
- A lack of follow through;
- A lack of responsibility.

And, all in all, we end up with a government which isn't delivering good government.

And, frankly, a government which probably isn't that much fun to be in, either as a Minister or as an MP. At least, not that much fun if you wanted to be an MP to do some good in the world, and to make a positive difference. There are probably some who just enjoy the 'game', the 'cut and thrust' of debate. Fine. There's space for that in the world. But there isn't space in the operation of the decision-making of government for **only** treating government like a game. At least some of it needs to be doing some good in the world, and making a positive difference.

We really need to look at how we structure the way we use our current system.

That involves giving careful consideration both to

- the way the structure works,

and to

- the way in which we use it.

And that's what we're going to be doing for the rest of this Season. Examining how we use our current system, and working out if some small changes to the ways in which we use the system – or to the ways in which the system is expected to work – could lead to better outcomes for all of us. Politicians included.

Next time:

Next time, we are going to start with a look at the big challenges for the world, for our country, for our society, and for us – the big challenges which don't get dealt with properly (because our elected politicians are worried that the result of dealing with the big challenges would require some unpopular short-term decisions, which in turn might mean that those same politicians wouldn't get re-elected). That is why these big challenges are known as the 'Wicked Issues'.

But there is a possible way in which we might deal with the 'Wicked Issues'. It's actually a system which has been successfully trialled in a number of countries around the world. It's called 'Citizens' Assemblies'. We touched on this in an earlier episode (22, with XR), but we will be looking at Citizens' Assemblies again, next time.

If you would like to have a look at transcripts of the podcast, including links to all of our sources and references, please go to www.talktogether.info, and follow the links to the Podcast from there. And, of course, if you would like to contact us – not least if you would like to share any ideas which you have about how we could make things better, or if there are any areas of how Politics is supposed to work, but why it isn't working, which you would like to draw to our attention – then please email us at any time on info@talktogether.info.

If you have enjoyed this podcast, then I hope that you will take the time to tell your friends. And perhaps you could also take a moment to give us a rating wherever you found us – that not only helps other people to find us; it also just really makes us feel appreciated. 9

That would be great. Thank you.